

The Name of the Face: Marital Trauma in Trauma in “Lappin and Lapinova”

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Judith Butler has written that the “Levinasian notion of the ‘face’ has caused critical consternation for a long time.” “The ‘face’ of the other cannot be read for a secret meaning, and the imperative it delivers is not immediately translatable into a prescription that might be linguistically formulated and followed” (*Precarious*, 131). Nevertheless, Levinas’s concept of the face has become an increasingly important one in trauma studies.

With his challenge to locate the meaning of our existence in our ethical response to the presence of other, which he locates in the “face,” Levinas offers a radical alternative to the Western philosophy of being which in its most extreme form seems to sanction—if not express—the genocidal impulse to violence rooted in our culture. A key concept in his philosophy, the “visage” conveys a paradox which one translator has defined as “neither presented nor represented and yet unique and individual, that bears above and beyond, that is beneath all features the expression of the human condition, [and] that opens to the ethical dimension of the human condition” (*Humanism* xlv).

In my larger essay on trauma and audience from which this paper is drawn, I focus on the Woolf’s understand of and search for a listening “other” in *Between the Acts*. Incorporating the details of her sexual abuse and its aftermath in the thoughts and actions of her characters, and reflecting the fear of violence and the failure of relationship that the traumatized may experience in their quest for another who will listen to and believe their story, Woolf explores the possibility of communication. By implying that the marriage of Isa and Giles is a performance, Woolf suggests not only that each spouse is an actor, but also

that each is an audience to the other. In this paper I want to focus on Woolf's exploration of marriage presented in her story "Lappin and Lapinova." I should note here that I will be deferring my discussion of the impact of incest on gender in *Mrs. Dalloway* to another time.

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Woolf explores the mortal peril that exists in the failure to amuse and distract the audience of the "other" in her story "Lappin and Lapinova." Its brief rehearsal of the anxiety of marriage presages the longer exploration of marital performance given in the *Between the Acts*. In "Lappin and Lapinova," Woolf relates the fantastical conduct of a newly-wed wife who must negotiate the intimacy of marriage and the loss of selfhood it threatens, by involving her husband in an elaborate story similar to those Woolf was reported to have concocted by her family and friends.

While the adjustment to marriage is a difficult one for any woman in a society that privileges masculine authority, it is even more so for the survivor of childhood sexual trauma. As Daniel Schetky reports in his review of the literature on the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse, "Difficulties in interpersonal relationships is a common complaint among incest victims [...] who often complain of about feeling detached, not being able to trust, and feeling hostile to men. [...] Sexual difficulties are common. Social skills may be impaired and separation-individuation is often discouraged in incestuous families. [...] Women who were severely traumatized were more likely to be divorced or separated" (40-45). As a result, the trauma survivor must deploy an array of strategies within a conjugal relationship to secure a fragmented sense of self and assure its continuation.

In addition to these symptoms of childhood abuse, the incest survivor must also stabilize a gender identity undermined by sexual trauma perpetrated by a close male relative.

Judith Butler has argued in *Gender Trouble*:

“[T]he ego ideal regulates and determines masculine and feminine identification. Because identifications substitute for object relations and [...] are the consequence of loss, gender identification is a kind of melancholia in which the sex of the prohibited object is internalized as a prohibition. This prohibition sanctions and regulates discrete gendered identity and the law of heterosexuality. (*Gender* 80)

Taken together, Butler argues, the taboo against incest and the taboo against homosexuality operate to resolve the Oedipal complex. While Butler gives priority to the prohibition against homosexuality, arguing that the “young boy” and “young girl” who come to an incestuous relationship are already predisposed to “distinct sexual directions” (*Gender* 81), here I want to emphasize the double displacement that an incest victim experiences as a result of her trauma. As a result of childhood incest, the survivor will be affected not only by the panic induced by sexual intimacy but also by the unconscious fear of an unstable gender identity because the incest taboo.

Butler returns to the topic of the relationship of incest and gender in her more recent essay “Quandaries of the Incest Taboo.” There she rather shakily suggests that not all incest need be traumatic, pointing to the “idyllic” appearance of brother/sister incest in eighteenth-century literature. (This thought seems to have been presaged by her description in *Gender Trouble* of the “young boy” and “young girl” quoted above, which neglects the violence—real or threatened—which so frequently accompanies incest in the family.) Nevertheless,

she also argues that “[t]o the extent that there are forms of love that are prohibited or, at least, derealized by the norms established by the incest taboo, both homosexuality and incest qualify for such forms” (*Undoing* 159). This linkage is particularly relevant to the study of Woolf as a lesbian trauma survivor, and I think helps to advance a (queer) theory that makes both topics more legible in her life and work.

Both taboos threaten Rosalind in “Lappin and Lapinova” who, four days after her wedding, “had still to get used to the fact that she was Mrs. Ernest Thorburn” (*CSF* 255). “Perhaps she would never get used to the fact that she was Mrs. Ernest Anybody” she worries as she struggles to accept the dissolution of her feminine self-identity implied in the loss of her own name. “Ernest,” she thinks to herself, attempting to adjust to the male name she has been given, “was a difficult name to get used to. It was not a name she would have chosen. She would have preferred Timothy, Anthony, or Peter” (*CSF* 255). Internalizing the legally sanctioned gender instability that her change of name implies, Rosalind appropriates the masculine in an attempt to alleviate the anxieties of gender identification. Attempting to negotiate the demands of marriage and its threatened destabilization of gender role and self embodied in her husband, Rosalind can only imagine his visage to be something other than his human self:

“But here he was. Thank goodness he did not look like Ernest—no. But what did he look like? She glanced at him sideways. Well, when he was eating toast he looked like a rabbit. No one else would have seen a likeness to the creature so diminutive and timid in this spruce, muscular young man with the straight nose, the blue eyes, the very firm mouth.” (*CSF* 255)

At first Ernest enters into the fantasy that Rosalind has created, joining her in a private world “that made them feel, more even than most married couples, in league together against the world” (*CSF* 257). But Rosalind’s defense is difficult to sustain, and she is continually threatened with self-dissolution. When at her in-laws golden wedding anniversary, her performance momentarily fails, she is, like Miss LaTrobe, threatened with extinction, “She felt that her icicle was being turned into water. She was being melted; dispersed; dissolved into nothingness; and would soon faint” (*CSF* 259). The perilous situation of the traumatized subject is an emotionally precarious one. Marion Solomon describes the situation of an incest survivor in an intimate relationship: “When there are long ingrained defenses against attachment failures, anything can become a source of stress and pain. A look not given, a message not understood, a yearning for closeness not met, become magnified into a recreation of emotions around early trauma” (324).

Over time, Ernest cannot maintain his role as audience to Rosalind’s fantasy which, it should be noted, allows not only for intimate communication but conjugal relations as well. After two years of marriage Rosalind’s strategy has weakened. Now “it took him five minutes at least to change from Ernest Thorburn to King Lappin; and while she waited she felt a load at the back of her neck, as if somebody were about to wring it. At last he changed to King Lappin; his nose twitched; and they spent the evening roaming the woods much as usual” (*CSF* 260). But Ernest’s withdrawal from the fantasy, signaled by his lapse, provokes in Rosalind a somatic dissociative response characteristic of post-traumatic stress disorder:

Next day she could settle to nothing. She seemed to have lost something.

She felt as if her body had shrunk; it had grown small, and black and hard.

Her joints seemed stiff too, and when she looked in the glass, which she did several times as she wandered about the flat her eyes seemed to burst out of her head like currants in a bun. The rooms also seem to have shrunk. Large pieces of furniture jutted out at odd angles and she found herself knocking against them. (*CSF* 261)

Finally admitting the death of her fantasy and faced with the physical fact of her husband, “tall, handsome, rubbing his hands that were cold and red,” who refuses to continue his role as private audience, Rosalind succumbs to the self-murder she has attempted to stave off. “She waited, feeling hands tightening at the back of her neck ‘Caught in a trap,’ he said, ‘killed, and sat down and read the newspaper. So that was the end of the marriage’” (*CSF* 262). As if to underscore relationship of this scene with that of her own trauma, which she described as “the incident of the looking glass” in “Sketch of the Past, Woolf describes Ernest as “straighten[ing] his tie in the looking-glass over the mantelpiece” before dispatching his marriage.

Included among the many physiognomic features where Emmanuel Levinas has located the idea of the face are the back and the neck. Referencing Vassili Grossman’s description of the family members of Russian political prisoners queuing for news of them in his essay “Peace and Proximity,” Levinas writes, “‘People approaching the counter had a particular way of craning their neck and back . . . which seemed to cry, sob, and scream.’ The face as the extreme precariousness of the other” (*Peace* 167). Similarly, from her perspective as a trauma survivor, Woolf saw the bare female neck as an invitation to violence and returned to the image more than once. In *The Years*, for example, she situates a culture of sexual exploitation and abuse in a single gesture of Colonel Pargiter towards his

mistress: “His hand began its voyage up and down her neck, in and out of the thick long hair He drew her to him; he kissed her on the nape of the neck; and then the hand that had lost two fingers began to fumble rather lower down where the neck joins the shoulders” (Y 9). The peril suggested here is graphically repeated in “Lappin,” a twenty-year old story that Woolf was rewriting even as she worked on *Between the Acts*, when she had begun to focus even more closely on her own sexual abuse.

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The traumatic denouement of “Lappin and Lapinova” deeply troubles Levinas’s understanding of the dialogic nature of Being as it is exemplified in the relationship with the (heterosexual) other. He describes this relationship in terms which evoke an idealized state of marriage with its close habitation in which “the most spontaneous *lived experience* splits in two in order to become intimate in rejoining itself” (AT 92). In the Levinasian household we discover that “the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman” (TI 155). Woolf would capture this capitalized presence of the “Woman” in *To the Lighthouse*, creating in the character of Mrs. Ramsay the portrait of a female sacrificed to the unseeing, rageful male other. As with Mrs. Ramsay, the woman for Levinas is “the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation” (TI 155).

This feminization of the Other by Levinas has drawn the attention of feminist critics. In her essay “Reinhabiting the House of Ruth,” Claire Elize Katz notes the objections of De Beauvoir, for one, to Levinas’s concept of the feminine. De Beauvoir writes in her introduction to *The Second Sex* that while “wars, festivals, trading, treaties, and contests” among classes and nations tend to deprive the concept of “Other” of its absolute sense, “this

reciprocity has not been recognized between the sexes.” “No subject,” she states “will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential” (xxix-xxx). Examining the work of women in creating and maintaining a loving household, specifically in the Jewish tradition from which Levinas comes, Katz concludes that while the relationship between the feminine, the erotic, and the ethical remains “problematic” for Levinas, he does “in spite of himself” create “the conditions by which the feminine can participate in the ethical” (162, 164). But Katz fails to take into her account the consequences of the disturbance of the erotic that is the experience of a woman impacted by sexual trauma, which profoundly disorders any intimate relationship and so alters the nature of communication within it.

In his exploration of the dialogue “‘between us’” and “‘already-conversation,’” Levinas asserts that “To say ‘you’ is the primary fact of Saying [*Dire*]. All saying is direct discourse or a part of direct discourse. Saying is that rectitude from me to you, that directness of the face-to-face, directness of encounter par excellence, of which the geometer’s straight line may just be an optic metaphor” (AT 93). Susan Brison, however, writing from her perspective as a female survivor of rape and attempted murder, undermines Levinas’s claim of the “rectitude” of the straight line of discourse, as surely as Woolf did throughout her long career of narrative experimentation. Citing in her philosophical memoir the Holocaust survivor Jean Améry, she observes that the trauma victim experiences the loss of the belief that not only will her physical self be respected, but her metaphysical one as well. “‘From the moment of the first blow’” Brison writes, the victim loses “‘trust in the world,’ which includes ‘the irrational and logically unjustifiable belief in absolute causality perhaps, or the likewise the blind belief in the validity of inductive inference’” (46). Not surprisingly, then, the optic metaphor for the face-to-face

encounter to be found in “Lappin and Lapinova” is quite different from the one offered by Levinas. Woolf’s optical metaphor can be found in the display case of the Natural History Museum visited by Rosalind in her increasing distress and dissociation created by the daily reality of an incest survivor in the bondage of marriage: “The first thing she saw when she went in was a stuffed hare standing on sham snow with pink glass eyes. Somehow it made her shiver all over.” (CSF 261).

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